DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 516 FL 014 364

AUTHOR Richmond, Kent C.
TITLE Teacher-Induced Errors.
PUB DATE 15 Mar 84
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (San Jose, CA, March 15, 1984).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Error Patterns; *Second Language Instruction; Teacher Effectiveness; *Writing Difficulties; *Writing Instruction; Writing Readiness

ABSTRACT

Students of English as a second language (ESL) often come to the classroom with little or no experience in writing in any language and with inaccurate assumptions about writing. Rather than correct these assumptions, teachers often seem to unwittingly reinforce them, actually inducing errors into their students' work. Teacher-induced errors occur when teachers mislead students by overemphasizing some aspect of the writing process or when students oversimplify and apply a principle or strategy too broadly. Two related pieces of advice commonly given to students are to use a variety of sentence structures and to avoid an unpleasant repetition of a word or phrase. Students often misunderstand these to mean: don't use the same sentence structure twice, and don't repeat a word or phrase. In response to these recommendations, students force errors into their writing, complicating it unnecessarily, making it awkward, and losing coherence. Students should first be encouraged to write coherent and error-free prose that reads smoothly, uses economical language, does not require the reader to backtrack, and allows the reader to accurately guess what the writer is saying. When taught this way, students will naturally vary their sentences and not be preoccupied unnecessarily. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED244516

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

TEACHER-INDUCED ERRORS

Kent C. Richmond

California State University, Long Beach

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kent C. Richmond

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

Many writing texts and writing teachers instruct students to vary sentence structure and avoid repetition in their in their writing. Although this advice sounds reasonable, ESL students are apt to apply blindly such axioms to their writing and produce a preponderance of ungrammatical and stylistically awkward sentences. This paper will examine the kinds of "teacher-induced" errors that this advice creates in student compositions and explore the role of sentence variation in coherent writing. This paper will also maintain that the concept of sentence variation is vacuous in a communicative approach to writing.

This paper was first presented at the CATESOL Annual State Conference, March 15, 1984.

Kent C. Richmond, M.A., is an ESL instructor in the American Language Program at California State University, Long Beach and also serves as the testing Specialist for this program. Each summer he coordinates the CSULB ESL Teacher Training Institute, which trains teachers of English from the Far East. He is a coauthor or Interface: Academic English in Context for Students of English as a Second Language, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in Fall, 1984.

FL014364

When ESL students write compositions in English, they make errors for a number of well-documented reasons. We know that they make errors when they translate word for word from their own language. They make errors because they do not fully understand the form, meaning, and function of tenses, aspects, articles, phrasal verbs, and other areas of English that any learner has difficulty mastering. They also make errors because they understand little about the discourse or rhetorical patterns or thought patterns of English and substitute patterns from their native language and culture.

Yet as I have gained experience as a writing teacher, I have come to see that we are not simply dealing in our writing classes with students who do not know the grammar of English or are unfamiliar with English rhetorical or thought patterns. We are typically dealing with students who have done little or no formal writing in English or any language. These students have only the vaguest notion as to what expository writing involves and bring into the classroom inaccurate assumptions about writing. Some of these notions indeed come from their own cultures, but some seem to be rather common, if not universal assumptions, that inexperienced writers make about writing.

It would seem then that teachers merely have to identify and correct these false assumptions and set the students to writing. But I have seen evidence that teachers, rather than correcting these inaccurate notions, may unwittingly reinforce them. In this way, teachers actually induce errors in their students' work. By questioning students in order to discover what they think good writing involves, I have discovered that "teacher-induced" errors result when teachers mislead students by over-

simplifying some aspect of the writing process or when students oversimplify and apply a principle or strategy too broadly.

In this paper, I will focus on two related pieces of advice that teachers often give students. Both pieces of advice may reinforce notions commonly held by weak writers, and both can induce errors. The first goes something like this:

Teacher says: In order to write well, you must employ a variety of sentence structures (the teacher sometimes adds, "to avoid monotony").

Student hears: Don't use the same sentence structure twice, or use complicated sentences because simple sentences are boring.

The second piece of advice often takes this form:

Teacher says: Avoid an unpleasant repetition of a word or phrase.

Student hears: Don't repeat the same word or phrase.

If these two axioms are necessary knowledge for a good writer, then I have to wonder why students need my writing courses at all because so many students know them. Native speakers of English struggling through remedial writing courses know them, young Indochinese students who have completed their secondary education in the United States know them, international students who have never studied English composition know them,

and students who have never studied formal composition in any language know them. Yet none of these students can produce a unified, coherent, or error-free paragraph when they enter my class. We must certainly suspect that these two strategies for producing good writing are of little help to developmental or remedial writing students.

On the surface, the teacher's advice to vary sentence structure and avoid unpleasant repetition sounds harmless. But students create problems when they are preoccupied with varying structure and avoiding repetion. The student who wrote the following paragraph said he was trying to vary sentence structure:

> (1) Many people like the United States of America. (2) They have tried to get in this country with many reasons. (3) From 1820 to 1920, 33,654,803 Europeans people came here and year 1979 only 460,346 people. (4) Besides, Europeans were Asians people, the second largest number tried to get in this country 9,500,000 and year 1979, they were only 183,000 peole. (5) The third largest number were 2,724,713 people were from North, Central, and South Americas and year 1979, there were only ...

In the paragraph the student was supposed to show how the nationalities of immigrants coming to the U.S. changed from 1820 to the present. Before beginning, the student had studied similar paragraphs and these two sentences:

> From 1820 to 1920, an average of 337,000 Europeans came to the

United States each year.

By 1979, the number had decreased to 64,173.

The student's paragraph is weak throughout, but it seriously breaks down in sentence (4). In sentence (3) the student uses the pattern he had studied although not accurately. However, the student abandoned the pattern and wrote the seriously flawed and unnecessarily complicated sentences that follow. When I asked the student why he had constructed the sentences in this way, he said that he did not want to repeat the same sentence pattern. When I asked him if he saw any problems with the paragraph, he told me was trying not to repeat any thing so that it would not be boring. By any measure, this paragraph is incompetent and the student is not ready to attempt this kind of pargraph, but it amazes me that the student is worrying about sentence variety when he has so little control of English.

This student is struggling with English and was frustrated in his efforts to improve. But a teacher at another college had given him a simple strategy for success that appealed to him--vary sentence structure. In this student's view, his problem is not that his vocabulary is weak, not that he has little sense of the form and function of English sentences, or little knowledge of the means by which a paragraph is made cohesive and coherent--all difficult things to learn and understand. But a teacher had given him an easy strategy to understand--vary sentence structure. By doing so, the student produced impossibly flawed sentences rather than practicing the concise and easy-to-control patterns and models I gave him.

Students also force errors into their writing when they become preoccupied with avoiding repetition. The following sentences were written by a student who had been told by a writing teacher to avoid repetition by using synonyms:

> The life-cycle of the frog has three stages: the egg stage, the tadpole stage, and the adult stage. The formerly of these occurs when the females lays the eggs ...

For the awkward, wordy, and ungrammatical phrase The formerly of these occurs the student could have written the phrase In the egg stage. When I asked the student about her reasoning, she said that it would sound bad and be boring to repeat the phrase egg stage. A victim of bad advice, the student was forced to go beyond her English ability and thus produce errors because she did what she had been told to do.

Teachers are not always to blame for inducing these kinds of errors. The student who wrote the paragraph that follows came into my class with the common notion among inexperienced writers that varying sentence structure is the main task of a writer. He had never studied English composition before and had limited writing experience in his native language.

> (1) Although human have a more complex social arragement, the social behavior of chimpanzees and humans have many similarities. (2) First of all, both chimpanzees and humans can mate year-round. (3) Secondly, chimpanzees have a similar basic social unit. (4) This means that chimpanzees have complex

and unstable social hierarchy like humans. (5) Another similarity, division of labor, chimpanzees is based on gender and social status, which is partly similar to humans. (6) Above all, what the most similarity between chimpanzees is with respect to social interaction. (7) Both of them are playful, inquisitive, imitative, and even can defend their territory violently as well as band together to fight.

The student said that he varied the sentence structure in sentences (5) and (6) because he did not want to have the words human and chimpanzee in the subject position of the sentence. The paragraph suffers a major breakdown in these sentences because to avoid repeating the same subject and to still provide coherence, the student constructed a rather wild and desparate sentence with three subjects linked by commas. Sentence (6) attempts a wordy and flawed pseudo-cleft sentence. Generally, the para- is wordy and difficult to follow. After I told the student that it was proper to repeat the same information in the subject position, the student, greatly relieved to hear this, produced this revision:

... (5) They also have division of labor based partly on gender and social status. (6) Above all, the most similarity between chimpanzees and humans concerns their social interaction ...

Although imperfect, the paragraph is more coherent and lacks the gross errors of the original. The student struggled with the original because he misunderstood something about writing. Had a teacher told him to vary sentence structure, his misunderstanding would have been reinforced.

When I teach writing, my goal is to get students to write coherent and error-free prose. By coherent prose I mean writing that reads smoothly, uses economical language, does not require the reader to backtrack, and allows the reader to make an accurate guess as to what the writer is saying. I want my students' prose to be clear, concise, and "friendly." When students are preoccupied with sentence variation, they worry more about the structure of sentences than their value as units of communication; consequently, they too often sacrifice clarity, conciseness, and friendliness.

At this point, I will take a closer look at the kind of grammar and style errors that students make. In one assignment, students had to use statistics from a table to show how U.S. passenger car efficiency had improved. Before writing, they studied a model paragraph and practiced converting statistics in a table into prose. They studied these two patterns:

> In 1974, passenger cars averaged 13.43 miles per gallon.
> From 1974 to 1977, the average number of miles per gallon
> increased from 13.43 to 13.94.

To complete the paragraph, students had to report at least three statistics about fuel efficiency. I assumed that the students could report three statistics with two patterns, but many students looked for a third pattern. Here are two examples:

> (a) The average car increased 13.64 miles per gallon in 1977
> increased to 14.29 in 1979.

(b) By 1979, an increase in the fuel efficiency was 14.29 miles per gallon.

Sentence (a) is clearly ungrammatical, with the finite verb increased used twice within the same clause. The second sentence is also flawed grammatically but is guilty of another error. It is over-nominalized; that is, too much information is carried by nouns in the subject position and too little by the verb in the predicate. The following sentences illustrate this point:

(a) Passenger cars averaged 13.74 miles per gallon

(b) The average (number of miles per gallon) increased from 13.74 to 13.94.

(c) The average number of miles per gallon for passenger cars was 13.74.

(d) The increase in the number of miles per gallon was from 13.74 to 13.94.

Of the four, sentences (a) and (b) are preferable because the writer used both the subject and predicate (particularly the verb position) to carry information. Sentence (b) has a more complicated subject than (a), but the nominalization is justified because the word average must be taken from the verb position to make way for the verb increase. Sentence (b) is more complicated, but it carries more information. Sentence (c) is flawed because it gives the same information as sentence (a) but uses a more complicated pattern than necessary. The over-nominalized subject

is wordy and leaves the verb position empty of information. Sentence (c), and sentence (d) as well, is unbalanced and violates the stylistic tendency in English to place the bulk of the new information in the predicate.

Sentences (c) and (d) also lead to other problems. For ESL students these sentences are difficult to produce. The subject position of sentence (d) contains two complicated prepositional phrases. My students who attempted this pattern would use the wrong preposition, insert finite verbs in the middle of the noun phrase, or even omit the verb in the predicate. So by varying sentence structure, students produced both errors of style and grammar. Both kinds of errors contribute to incoherent writing.

By varying sentence structure in this way, students also lose opportunities to reduce the number of sentences and write more concisely. The student who wrote the following sentences missed a chance to combine sentences through the process of ellipsis.

> (1) In the 1930s, it took 108 work-hours to produce 100 bushels of corn. (2) By the 1940s, the number of work-hours to produce the same amount decreased to 53 hours. (3) By the 1950s, corn production per 100 bushels was twenty work-hours.

Had the student used the same pattern in sentences (2) and (3), then the two sentences could be combined.

> ... (2) By the 1940s, the number of work-hours to produce the same amount decreased to 53 hours, and by the 1950s to just twenty hours.

This example shows that varying sentence structure can be costly because many methods of conjunction and ellipsis are possible only if the sentences are parallel in structure. Ironically, if the student in the above case had combined sentences (2) and (3), she would not have had to woory about repeating the same sentence structure.

There is even more irony in this. Many college writing texts teach students to use a variety of sentence structures to avoid choppy and incoherent writing. A great number of ESL texts such as Bander's American English Rhetoric (1978) and non-ESL texts such as Langan's English Skills (1981) and Troyka and Nudelman's Steps in Composition (1982) demonstrate how to compose compound and complex sentences. They teach students to make adverbial clauses, adjective clauses, participial phrases, and appositives. However, when students vary sentence structure, they too often rely on nominalization rather than on subordination and coordination. For example, students will recognize that the sequence of sentences in (a) below is choppy and incoherent,

(a) Billboards cause safety problems. Billboards distract the driver's attention away from road signs.
(b) The safety problems caused by billboards are due to the distracting of the driver's attention away from road signs.
(c) Billboards cause safety problems because they distract the driver's attention away from road signs.

but they tend to produce sentences similar to the awkward and wordy (b) rather than sentence (c). In a sense, they get only half the message. The sentences in (a) are too simple, yet they do not trust the simple

subordination in (c). They stick to single-clause sentences and try to maintain coherence by nominalizing.

Many textbooks run into other difficulties because they teach sentence-combining skills apart from the process of composing paragraphs. They do not show the relationship between the kind of structure that writers select and its effect on the paragraph. The following paragraphs illustrate this:

> (a) Insects can cause problems for man. They can benefit farmers. They are six-legged, air-breathing animals. Bees help farmers by pollinating flowers.
>
> (b) (absurd revision) Insects, which can benefit farmers, are six-legged animals, but they can cause problems for man. What bees do is pollinate flowers so much that they help farmers.
>
> (c) (reasonable revision) Although insects, which are six-legged, air-breathing animals, can cause problems for man, they can benefit farmers. Bees, for example, help farmers by pollinating flowers.

In paragraph (a), each sentence is equal, and each makes an assertion about insects. Since no single assertion is dominant, the paragraph lacks unity. Paragraph (b) employs sophisticated sentence structures. It uses conjunction and relativization and even has a pseudo-cleft sentence containing a clause of result. Yet it is devoid of unity and coherence, and although it is an exaggeration, inexperienced writers will produce this kind of writing.

What we want from students is paragraph (c). To achieve unity,

this paragraph emphasizes the assertion that insects benefit farmers by putting it in a main clause and deemphasizes the assertion about insect problems by placing it in an adverbial clause of concession. The seemingly irrelevant statement about the physical characteristics of insects is placed in a non-restrictive adjective clauses where it will not harm the unity.

The goal of writing instruction should be to teach students to produce paragraph (c), not (b), but if we teach subordination, coordination, and relativization, all means of varying sentence structure, apart from the writing process, we obscure this goal and delay our students' progress. To discourage the mindless sentence variation of paragraph(b), we need to teach the process of paragraph writing and advanced sentence skills simultaneously. In other words, we must follow one of the canons of communicative language teaching--that linguistic form and communicative function are tightly interwoven and should be taught together.

The two exercises that follow both teach students to form non-restrictive adjective clauses. The first one, though, teaches form only, while the second teaches form and function at the same time.

(a) This exercise teaches form apart from function.

Combine the sentences by putting the second sentence into a non-restrictive adjective clause.

The I.Q. test has been criticized for not testing all aspects of intelligence. The I.Q test was invented in 1904.

Answer: The I.Q. test, which was invented in 1904, has been criticized for not testing all aspects of intelligence.

(b) This exercise teaches both form and function.

Each sequence below contains one sentence that does not support the idea in the topic sentence. In order to maintain unity, put the sentence into a non-restrictive adjective clause.

The I.Q. test has been criticized for not testing all aspects of human intelligence. The I.Q. test was invented in 1904. For example, the I.Q. test does not test the ability to ...

Answer: The I.Q. test, which was invented in 1904, has been criticized for not testing all aspects of human intelligence. For example, it does not test the ability to ...

The second exercise shows that nonrestrictive adjective clauses allow the writer to add background information without destroying the unity of the paragraph. With this exercise, the student can see why writers might use a non-restrictive adjective clause.

If we teach writing in this way, by teaching form along with function, the concept of sentence variation becomes vacuous. If students are taught the means to produce unified, coherent, and concise prose, their sentences will naturally vary, for sentence variation is a by-product or careful writing, not an adornment. Teaching ESL students to write is difficult. A teacher can become frustrated when students submit a greatly flawed essay consisting of an incoherent stream of simple assertions that lead nowhere. The temptation is to "panic" and tell students, "You have got to vary your sentence structure." But this tactic is a dangerous shortcut. It can mislead students as to how good writing is produced and can cause unnecessary errors. ESL students, or perhaps any students of English

expository writing, should not concern themselves with the stylistic issues of sentence variation and unpleasant repetition until they can produce coherent, unified, and concise prose.

REFERENCES

Bander, Robert G. American English Rhetoric. 1978. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Langan, John. English Skills. 1981. New York: MacGraw-Hill.

Troyka, Lynn Quitman, and Jerrold Nudelman. Steps in Composition. 1982 Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.